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BATTLE BETWEEN

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Merrimac

AND THE

Monitor



BY ELIJAH W. FLAKE,
One of the Survivors of the Merrimac.



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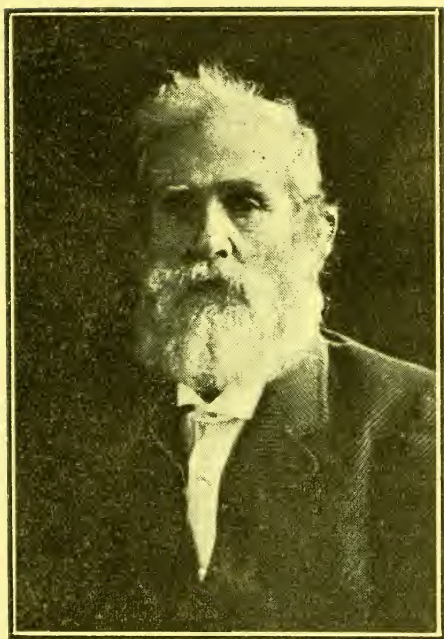
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MAR -5 1914



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Battle Between The Merrimac And The Monitor.

By E. W. FLAKE,

One of the Survivors of the Merrimac.

About ten years ago I read in the Charlotte Observer something about the last survivor of the Merrimac. Not many days after a man in Tennessee bobbed up by the name of Allbright stating that he served on the Merrimac as Paymaster. I knew he was one of our crew for I had received money from his hands. Some years after that I read of another man who had died, being the "last survivor of the Merrimac." Later I was informed that the Legislature of North Carolina had pensioned the "last survivor of the Merrimac," whose name I did not learn. I will make this statement, however, that it wasn't me. Not many months ago I read of the death of a man in Tennessee by the name of Eggleston who was supposed to be "the last survivor of the Merrimac." So you see, my friends, it is a hard matter to get behind—"the last survivor of the Merrimac." But this I know—I served on the Mer-

rimac during the engagement between her and the three wooden ships that blockaded the James River, and also the next day between the Merrimac and the Monitor. The Merrimac was also called "The Virginia" and the Monitor was also called "The Ericson Battery." There being so many survivors and "last survivor" of the Merrimac, I wish to prove my claim by living witnesses that I was one of the boys who took part in the first battle between iron clads in the history of the world. By calling on Mr. W. K. Boggan, our Clerk of the Superior Court, he will show you a list of the names of Anson Guards and where my name appears as having been transferred to the Navy. Our regiment was then stationed near, Smithfield, Virginia, not very far from Portsmouth, where the Merrimac was being made ready for the coming conflict. But if I had no further proof, the fact that I was transferred to the Navy would not make good my claim that I was one of the crew of the Merrimac, for I might have been sent to some other port and some other ship and still have been in the Navy. My next witness will be Mr. E. F. Fenton, who will tell you that he and I corresponded while I was on the Merrimac. Mr. E. D. Gaddy will tell you that he made me a present of a Bible when I left the company to enlist as one of the crew of that ship. Dr. E. A. Covington and Capt. W. A. Smith, living witnesses, will tell you that I was

transferred from the Anson Guards to the first iron clad ship that ever fired a gun in naval warfare. "Seeing that we are compassed about by so great a crowd of witnessess" let us proceed to describe the battle as best we can between the three wooden ships; also between the Merrimac and Monitor the next day. But before we begin the description of the two days' battle let us give a description of our ship and her armament. Our ship, as most everybody knows, was a hull of a United States ship which the Union forces destroyed when they evacuated Norfolk and Portsmouth early in the year 1861. The name of the vessel was the "Merrimac" named "The Virginia" by the Confederates after it was rebuilt by them. Hence, the two names. Almost every writer refers to it as the "Merrimac," consequently we shall deal with it as the "Merrimac" and not as the "Virginia." When the Union forces left the Navy Yard at Portsmouth they not only destroyed the "Merrimac," but burned everything in the Navy Yard that could be burned. The hull of the "Merrimac" was 275 feet long and the house or shield built upon this hull was one hundred and sixty feet long. Our armour consisted of ten guns as follows: Four Brooke rifles, two of which was 7 inches, and two were 6.4 inches, six 9 inch smooth bores. The two 7 in. rifles were known as the stern and bow guns, and the other 8 were known as the port and starboard

batteries. Our armor plate consisted of two layers of broad iron—each two inches thick, fastened to wooden beams, two feet thick. These wooden beams were fastened to the ship like rafters to a house, only they did not come together at the top—leaving a flat space at the top of the ship, called the spar deck. Port poles were made for the guns mounted on carriages inside of the ship. These carriages were operated by ropes and tackles. It took from 15 to 20 men to operate one gun. The crew of ship was 320. Had we put three layers of iron on our ship at first, as we did after the battle with the “Monitor,” we would doubtless have brought the “Monitor” home with us, and there would have been no bragging over a victory that was never won, and McClellan’s men could never have taken refuge in the James River on the Union gun boats. “Ifs” and “buts” are great hindrances in war as well as other things. We will now lead you down the Elizabeth River to the mouth of the James where are three large battle ships and over 100 guns to welcome our coming. On the 8th day of March, 1862, we introduced ourselves to the enemy lying in Hampton Roads, and not only to these war ships, but we proclaimed to the world that hence forth it must look to the mines as well as the forest for material with which to build battle ships. See us as we steam along on our iron craft about 21 feet under water and some 10 or 12 above,

with 4 inch of armor plate and ten guns ! Spectators are on the shore, both Confederate and Union, and are anxiously looking on and listening for the first gun. Norfolk and Portsmouth were almost deserted going to Sewell's Point, Craney Island and other points, where they could witness the battle they knew was to soon take place. Handkerchiefs were waving and flags were displayed by those on shore, but no cheering could be heard. A death-like stillness pervades the scene. A gun from the gunboat Beaufort is fired at the Congress as an opening shot. The Merrimac now steamed alongside the Congress, giving her a broadside of four guns and receiving twice that many from her. We are in close range and our shots take effect while the shots from the enemy make no impression on our iron sides. We make no halt but steam right ahead for the Cumberland not far above in the James river. The Cumberland had destroyed the Merrimac when she left the Navy Yard in Portsmouth early in 1861 and now the Merrimac proposes to renew old acquaintanceship with her. With our prow aimed at the wooden side of the Cumberland and with a full head of steam on we soon ran our prow into her wooden side, and soon the bottom of the Cumberland and the bottom of the river are in each other's embraces, while the mast poles of the ship stand out of the water as so many tombstones pointing to the dead

below. The crew of the gun to which I belonged gave a shout recalling what the Cumberland had done at the Navy Yard early in 1861. Our Lieutenant, J. R. Eggleston, joined in the cheer, but Lieut. C. R. Jones, now in command of the ship, rebukes us. But our victory is not without loss to the Confederates, for two men have been killed and several wounded, including our Commodore, and the ends of two of our guns have been shot off. Commodore Buchanan was wounded while on top the Merrimac by a minnie ball from the Cumberland, but our killed and other wounded was through port holes. The explosion of a shell from the enemy's gun that shot off the ends of two of our guns wounded several of our men, but the men killed, I think, were through port holes by small arms. Lieut. Jones, now in command, starts back to the Congress we left crippled. As the Minnesota had gotten into shallow water and the day was drawing to a close we wasted but little time with her, but made for the Congress we had left crippled. Firing another broadside into her brings down the stars and stripes to be replaced by the white flag. Sending one of our wooden boats for the prisoners and the spoils, the enemy fired on it from the land, so after taking twenty-three prisoners, we fire a hot shot into the Congress and set it on fire. It was now nearly night, and the Merrimac retired to Sewell's Point, and there rested for the night.

The burning Congress and the explosion of her magazines furnished a grand spectacle for all who witnessed the scene. But before another night shall have spread its darkness over the face of the deep another scene is to take place, the like of which has never been witnessed in the history of the world before. During the night another iron clad passed by way of Fortress Monroe to the battle-ground of the day previous. This new comer is called the "Monitor," and belongs to the Union forces. She is of small size, carrying only two guns, but she need not be despised, for she has come for business. Planting herself by the Minnesota about midnight she waits for the morning and the coming of the "Merrimac." Finally the "Merrimac" turns her bow towards the Minnesota and starts for the field of the previous day's engagement. Now we have two vessels dressed in black, steaming towards each other with intent to kill, but with four or five hour's duel, nobody is killed, and so far as the Merrimac is concerned, nobody is even wounded. Not a drop of blood has been drawn from any of the crew of the "Merrimac." Only her iron has been bent sufficient to splinter her wooden beams underneath the iron. But as for the Monitor I will let Mr. Green, who was temporarily in command of that ship, tell the story. Hear him :

"Soon after noon a shell from the enemy's gun,

the muzzle not ten yards distant, struck the forward side of the pilot house directly in the sight-hole or slit, and exploded, cracking the second iron log and partly lifting the top, leaving an opening. Worden was standing immediately behind this spot, and received in his face the force of the blow, which partly stunned him and filling his eyes with powder, entirely blinded him. * *

* * The flood of light rushing through the top of the pilot house, now partly opened, caused Worden, blind as he was, to believe that the pilot house was seriously injured, if not destroyed; he therefore gave orders to put the helm to starboard and "sheer off." Thus the Monitor retired temporarily from the action in order to ascertain the extent of the injuries she had received. At the same time Worden sent for me, and leaving Stimers, the only officer in the turret, I went forward at once and found him standing at the foot of the ladder leading to the pilot house. He was a ghastly sight. With his eyes closed and the blood apparently rushing from every pore in the upper part of his face."

At this point, while the Monitor was "sheered off," the Merrimac was hard and fast aground. Fortunately for us that the Monitor stayed "sheered off" during the time we were aground, for had the Monitor ran along side of us and landed another 180 lb. shot in the same place

she had struck us before, no telling what might have been the result. Again, had not the Merrimac got aground she would have probably pursued the Monitor while she was "sheered off", and had the Merrimac landed another shot against her pilot house, the Monitor, no doubt, would have surrendered. So you see that the "ifs" and the "buts" come in as arbitrators, allowing both sides to hold their ship, and giving each the privilege of claiming the victory. I cannot see how the Union side can claim a victory when, according to Mr. Green's statements they were the first to "sheer off" with a blind and bleeding commander, while the Merrimac withdrew after the Monitor had retreated without the loss of a drop of blood nor was the Merrimac leaking, as claimed by Mr. Green. After the Merrimac got afloat, rather than risk receiving another shot in the same place where we had already received a severe blow, retired to Portsmouth, and was put in the dry dock for repairs. The Monitor went to Fortress Monroe, making that her home. Thus the iron clads had met, and while neither one could claim the victory, the Monitor insisted that she gained the day. To show what a victory the Monitor had achieved she never gave the Merrimac another chance to measure arms with her. After repairing our ship and putting on another layer of iron, we went down to Hampton Roads to the same old battle-ground, and fired

a challenge shot at the Monitor lying under cover of Fortress Monroe, but the answer to our challenge was a slip of paper in a split stick fastened to a shingle and sent by means of the tide. The message on the paper read, "The Captain of the Merrimac will please make an attack." Lying securely under the fort, surrounded by torpedoes, the Monitor could safely say "The Captain of the Merrimac will please make an attack." To all the world who wonders why the Merrimac and Monitor never met after first engagement, I will say, and knowing whereof I speak, that the reason was because the Monitor would never meet us. After we had put an extra layer of iron on our ship we felt satisfied that we could more than cope with the Monitor, though she had the heaviest guns. Those who are familiar with the times know that McClellan was marching on Richmond, and it was decided to vacate Norfolk, but we were to carry the Merrimac and all the other boats with her. In order for the Merrimac to pass up the James she must throw off her ballast, so as to run in shallow water. That would expose her wood, and the Monitor learning of our plan, went up the James where she knew the Merrimac could not come without exposing her wood. So that is the reason so often asked why we destroyed our own ship. The Commander of the Merrimac in the first day's engagement was Commodore Buchanan, who

was wounded while we were engaged with the Cumberland. The command then fell upon Lieut. Jones who was in command during the engagement with the Monitor. On our second trip Commodore Tatnall was in command, but as the Monitor would not meet us he did not have a chance to show his hand. I was not on the Merrimac when she was set on fire, having been transferred to a wooden ship where our sick were quartered, expecting to be sent to Richmond along with the Merrimac. After evacuating Norfolk the crew of the Merrimac were quartered at Drewery's Bluff.

Having relapsed from an attack of measles I was sent by rail to a Navy hospital in Richmond. I was sent from there to a ship lying in the James river, where I witnessed the soldiers going to and coming from the battlefield, where the battle-cry of McClellan's men was "On to Richmond," but before the seven day's fight was ended they changed their song to "Off from Richmond Early in the Morning, down to the gunboats, run boys, run." Finally I was sent to Drewery's Bluff, where I was discharged and paid off by Mr. Allbright, our Paymaster, as mentioned before. I afterwards enlisted in the 26th Regiment, Company K., and was with it when Lee surrendered at Appomattox.

Wadesboro, N. C., }
February 26th, 1914. }

This is to certify that E. W. Flake was a member of Co. C. 14th Regiment N. C. Infantry, and was transferred to the Confederate State's Steamer "Merrimac" in preparation in the navy yard at Portsmouth, Va., early in the year 1862.

E. F. FENTON

DR. E. A. COVINGTON

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